

THE ROLE OF DR. MAX SOM IN CONSERVATION SURGERY OF THE HEAD AND NECK*

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I SHALL speak in a general way. It is not easy to introduce this whole subject and this person so just bear with me while I make a few general comments, and I think the other speakers will fill this out in a very specific way.

I should like to begin by saying that if we had a chance to pick a colleague to honor, we would first have to identify the uniqueness of that person, the merits and the immediate and long-range effects that that person would have on us personally and the practice of medicine in our milieu, and his projection into the future. When the focus of all of this is brought to bear on otolaryngology and cancer surgery of the head and neck, one automatically thinks of Dr. Max Som. His influence is felt in a personal way by every senior otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeon in this country, and indeed in many foreign countries. This apogee of awareness of his qualities filters down to the next generation of specialists in our field who have already grabbed the reins and have become the new leaders. It is not a mistake to say that many of these stars are his direct pupils or have been indirectly influenced by his teaching. These leaders have yet another echelon of students in the second generation following them who are pressing them and learning from them. Some of that fundamental and thrilling knowledge will unquestionably be identified as a derivative of Dr. Som's medical philosophy and practice. What a beautiful treasure it is for him to absorb this fragment of destiny.

Dr. Som was a teacher in his own very special way. He was best on a one-to-one basis and in the intimacy of informality. Most of his ideas were the result of his perceptions and an analysis of his vast personal experience. He blended this with a fundamental creativity that usually ended up with a logical set of surgical ideas that were full of common sense and clinical real-

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ity. In this milieu he was someone special, and that is the reason we are here today to pay him this honor.

Because he was so uniquely pleuripotential, it is difficult to capsulize him. I shall only look at one small aspect, his professionalism and his relationship to conservative surgery. Dr. Som was perhaps the first to appreciate the limits of radicality and the value of conservative surgery. His assessment of conservative surgery was supported by a balance between physiological function, mutilation and the end product of these in terms of compassion. He was always a human being. He applied this concept to everyone whom he operated upon. His ideas in sinus surgery and cancer of the sinuses introduced a whole new set of operations and fresh concepts about the application of radical surgery. Conservative surgery in combination with radiotherapy offered a realistic alternative. He mastered all aspects of parotid gland surgery, and applied his well honed instincts about when he should be radical. Cancer of the tongue was no stranger in his house, and he designed combinations of conservative approaches with regional rehabilitative flaps in an attempt to get the best out of all the therapeutic efforts. Another significant contribution was the preservation of the mandible in cancers of the tongue, floor of mouth and palate; it has perhaps not received as much attention as it deserves. His modification of the medial mandibular split provided excellent exposure of the oral cavity by dissolving the continuity of the mandibular arch at the anterior midline at the level of the mentum. He then swung the mandible laterally on the involved side to gain exposure and facilitate resection of the lesion. The mandible was then wired back into position along with closure of the soft tissues of the oral cavity. This concept has saved the mandible in countless patients in whom it would have been routinely sacrificed. This mandibular approach has also led to new approaches to the nasopharynx and the base of the skull as reported by Dr. Biller.

All of these aspects that support conservation are important enough, but I think that Dr. Som's most impressive contribution has been in surgery of the larynx and gullet. Mucous membrane flaps, laryngeal organ transfer and other regional techniques associated with partial and total pharyngectomy and laryngectomy were highly imaginative. An extended partial laryngectomy required a basic understanding of the physiology of breathing, speaking and swallowing. In his hands, conservation was always adequate cancer surgery, and this was documented by both the histology and pathology of this regional anatomy of the surgical specimens. In this work he carried

out evaluations in collaboration with other doctors, particularly Dr. Kirchner, which verified the efficacy of these techniques with authentic histologic material. I would like to make it very clear that Dr. Som never advocated inadequate surgery in his broad thrust for conservation techniques. Conservation means saving something, and of course the thing that you do not want to save is the cancer. Dr. Som knew the careful balance between adequacy of resection and conservation better than anyone else that I knew.

We appreciate as much as he does that all of us rise via those great men who have preceded us, and that in one sense we stand on their shoulders. Most of those who have helped us are unsung, unknown or are passing into oblivion. We take their teaching and richness almost for granted. Dr. Som has carried many of us on his shoulders with honor and affection, and that has made him a great physician.

I often write verse, and while thinking about what I would say today I wrote the following poem

DOCTOR MAX SOM

Where are the giants,
And the mysteries of their shadows,
Who give us their souls
In the sweat of their hearts?
We have this treasure in the real,
Wrapped in the quiet genius
Of instinct and hard work,
Climbing from zero to his summit
With the compassion of an angel
And the strength of a bull,
Accepting challenge by loving it
In a reception of analysis and craft
That gave him grace and power—
Without the imbalance of arrogance.
In this unflamed ascent
He has given us this essence
That is the religion of medicine
Through the teachings of his labor,
And in return we honor him with love.